DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 391 597 PS 023 919

AUTHOR Crase, Darrell; Crase, Dixie R.
TITLE Fear of Parental Death: Impact on Young Children.
PUB DATE [95]
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Development; *Child Health; *Childhood Attitudes; Child Psychology; Child Rearing; Children; *Death; Emotional Response; *Fear; Grief; *Mental Health; *Parent Child Relationship; Parents; Stress Management
IDENTIFIERS *Loss

ABSTRACT

For adults, fear of death is universal, but young children are exposed to realities of death only infrequently and are often shielded from it by parents. Because parents realize the extent of a child's fear of losing a parent, parents sometimes take precautionary steps, such as avoiding both parents' travelling on the same airplane or designating someone to care for a surviving child. For young children, the greatest source of stress is loss of a parent. Short-term effects of parental death vary, and are readily observed and appropriately addressed. Long-term effects are complex and difficult to ascertain. Some researchers believe loss of a parent should be regarded as a potential developmental problem, but research is contradictory and inconclusive. In general, children who are surrounded by alternative sources of emotional support and understanding tend to adjust well. However, some situations, when interacting with other variables, may exacerbate the grieving process. Finally, children can be taught in a developmentally appropriate way about death and learn that fears about parental loss are normal. (Contains 16 references.) (TM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 391 597

Fear of Parental Death: Impact on Young Children

by

Darrell Crase, Ph.D.

Dixie R. Crase, Ph.D.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Darrell Crase
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Darrell Crase, professor of health promotion, Department of Human Movement Sciences and Education, Dixie R. Crase, professor of child development and chair, Department of Consumer Sciences and Education and are both with The University of Memphis, Memphis, TN. 38152.

Address correspondence to: Dr. Darrell Crase, Dept. of HMSE, The University of Memphis, Memphis, TN 38152. Phone (901) 678-3473 or 3102; Fax (901) 678-3591; E-mail: crase.darrell@coe.memphis.edu

PS 023919

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Fear of Parental Death: Impact on Young Children

Death fear, death anxiety, death concern are terms often used interchangeably when focusing on loss. And while considerable research has been done on death fear/death anxiety much of it has been lacking in rigor and has yielded mixed results. The word *fear* is generally preferred when there is a specific, identifiable source encountered such as the fear of flying. *Anxiety* refers to feelings of apprehension and discomfort which are similar to those in fear, but without a specific, identifiable source (Kalish,1981). Kalish implies that it is difficult to know, in the context of death, whether the source is known or not, and so the terms death fear and death anxiety are used interchangeably. On occasions, other terms such as *dread* and *terror* may be substituted for fear and anxiety. In the following discussion, death fear is the preferred concept as we focus on a rather narrow concern relative to loss and its management, that of possible death of parents via some tragic accident such as an airplane crash leaving a young child or children to be cared for by other adults. We also discuss potential long term effects on bereaved children whose parent or parents die suddenly from an accident.

Death and Separation Fear

Among adults, the fear of dying and death appears to be universal whether they admit it or not. The magnitude of such fear may be modified by a number of variables including age, gender, state of health, perceptions, cognitive abilities, and certain socioeconomic demographics, among others. Becker's (1973) classic work, The Denial of Death, serves as a significant source for discussions of death fear. His examination of relevant research leads him to suggest that the fear of death is natural and is generally present in each of us, that it is the basic fear that influences all other fears, a fear from which no one is immune, no matter how disguised it may be. He views the fear of death not necessarily as a pathological behavior thus susceptible to

psychological intervention, but rather as a natural, universal, and intractable phenomenon. Becker implies that such fear is a healthy phenomenon that promotes a sense of caution, strength, and purpose. The fear of death, he suggests, must always be present behind our normal functioning, otherwise we would not be properly armed toward self-preservation. The possibility of the loss of human life is a reality that causes us to put forth considerable effort to avoid it, to be productive, and to want to live well but with caution within the projected human life span. Death fear is a particularly powerful force that causes parents to shield and protect young children from its harsh realities, its ugliness, its inevitability.

Death fear is multidimensional and therefore difficult to operationally define. It encompasses fears associated with disease and modes of death, the unknown, the body being destroyed, the dying process, the afterlife, and the separation from loved ones, from relationships, from acquisitions. Since a number of variables such as age, gender, health status, education, religion, among others may condition one's response to attempts to assess death fear, conclusions drawn from small studies on the subject of fear must be interpreted with caution.

Protective Posture

The literature on young children's development is replete with information about significant loss and behaviors of parents toward preventing and/or minimizing emotional and physical pain especially that associated with death. In today's society, most children are exposed to death's harsh realities on an infrequent basis; their death-related experiences are limited. Parents generally employ strategies toward protecting and shielding children from experiencing death either in a vicarious sense or through a direct relationship. As Fulton and Metress (1995) surmise: "Where death is concerned, children have come to be viewed as islands of innocence. Seeking to protect them, some adults have attempted to shield children from the truth

about serious illness and death, to hide their own grief, and to discourage or avoid its expression in the child" (p. 381).

Wass & Stillion (1988) address such protective behaviors by suggesting that children are generally neglected in discussions involving death and that communication with many young children, if initiated, is minimal and generally ineffective. Some parents sense that dealing with dying and death-related phenomena may so terrify children that pathological behaviors may be with them for a long time. Thus parents often tend to be vague and not so straightforward in addressing death encounters with children. Further, Wass and Stillion imply that parents themselves may be inadequate in dealing with loss through death and that accompanying fears and anxieties may exacerbate dealing with it at the child's level.

Among the possible losses through death, the fear of losing a child is an unmatched fear among parents and the obverse is true for children (Fulton & Metress, 1995). Thus many parents are particularly cognizant of some situations that might make them vulnerable to sudden death, leaving the child or children without their biological or adoptive parents. Sudden and tragic accidents that cause death including the likelihood of a two-parent loss weigh heavily on the minds of many parents. Two parents traveling simultaneously on an airplane while leaving their child or children behind is one such scenario.

Travel by airplane in the United States is a relatively safe practice . In fact, the National Safety Council correctly points out that considerably more deaths occur annually in other forms of travel than by air. Yet the fear of flying seems to be rather pervasive among many who choose to rely on that particular form of transportation. The fear does not appear to be based on the premise that airplanes are unsafe or that pilots are incompetent, but instead on the notion that should the plane crash the chance of survival is not good. While riding in an automobile, one does not sense the

same degree of fatalism should an accident occur.

Considerable anectdotal evidence exists suggesting that if both parents must travel, leaving the child or children behind, that they will choose or plan to fly in separate airplanes. Examples: The parents of three young children who were left behind under the care of grandparents drove to the airport for a trip together to New York. Upon arriving at the terminal the wife and mother of the children decided not to go at all and returned home. The fear that a crash could occur and that death could claim them both was too overwhelming for them to proceed. Similarly, two parents of three young children decided to drive a distance of four hundred miles, leaving the children with grandparents, rather than cover the distance quickly by air. Travel agents tell us that it is not at all uncommon for two parents to travel at different times and/or purchase tickets on separate aircraft due to this fear. However, if all the children are included on a scheduled flight with the parent or two parents, such a fear may not be as pervasive. A father was asked recently just before preparing for a Hawaiian vacation if he harbored this same fear complex when flying with his spouse separate from the children. He replied in a reassuring manner. Indeed he had processed this fear and his solution was for them all to fly together. There would be no one left behind should a major accident occur while in flight. In case of a single parent who is a frequent flyer, might such a fear be a continuing concern?

Fears can also be evident among relatives or friends who take care of children whose parent or parents choose to travel by air. Have preparations been made in case of a fatal accident? What will happen to the child or children? In addressing this possibility some parents may leave behind detailed instructions just in case of a fatal accident. Others assure a will is in place to provide direction for the care of children.

The fear of flying together by both parents appears to be a significant factor toward protecting children against loss. Other parental fears may emanate from the

possibility of death due to automobile accidents, house fires, or natural causes involving a rapid death trajectory. Such fears can be both positive and negative. On the positive side, parents may be driven toward adopting cautionary measures that reduce the likelihood of separation from children through death. The fear of destruction, of loss and death may also lead to an over protective posture with children and be destructive to both parents and children should their normal activities be limited by such fear.

Parents hold natural fears about the safety, security, and well-being of their children. Would parental death be a devastating blow to their young children? Who would protect them and provide for their nurturing during critical periods of development? As a cautionary and protective measure, many parents with young children often designate some person or persons who may or may not be a relative whom they would have care for their surviving child or children in case of parental death. Such a directive should be formalized in a legal manner in writing so as to avoid conflict and misunderstanding should both parents succumb simultaneously due to some accident. An estate will is the logical place for making such an affirmation. And a will should be a product of every individual and family who has accumulated property and who want that property, in case of death, to be distributed in some particular fashion so as to provide for surviving children.

Impact of Parental Loss

Nothing can be more fear producing for a child than the possibility of death of a parent. In fact, according to the cross cultural study of young school-age children from six countries, Yamamoto et al (1987) found that the fear of a parent's death ranked the highest among several stress producing items. Such a potential stressor was not gender specific and appeared to be a universal phenomenon. According to Palombo (1981), approximately six percent of all U. S. children experience the death of one or

both parents by the time they reach age 18.

The short term effects of parental death on children appear to vary depending on a number of factors including the age of a child, previous death experiences, child's level of cognition, strength of the support group, the nature of death, among others. The usual emotions including anxiety, hurt, anger, guilt, depression, and feelings of abandonment may also be a part of parental loss. Fulton & Metress (1995) cite studies that also show behavioral differences (aggression, hostility, depression, delinquency) and emotional disturbances to be more profound among bereaved children than those who are not bereaved. These behaviors are usually readily observed and can be addressed appropriately.

What are long term effects of parental loss? The answer to this question is more complex and difficult to ascertain. According to Kastenbaum (1995), age of a child at time of bereavement appears to be an important variable. He suggests that children under the age of seven typically have greater difficulty adjusting than older children. Of course this does not apply to all children. There may be considerable variance in the subsequent behavior of bereaved children. Authors Aiken (1994), Fulton and Metress (1995), and Kastenbaum (1995), among others, who have meticulously reviewed the relevant research warn us that bereavement from a parent's death should be regarded as a potential problem in many areas of a child's development. They cite accumulating evidence suggesting that a child who suffers loss by death of one or more parents is likely to be more vulnerable to physical and emotional problems throughout adult life compared with those who have not experienced parental death. For example, emotional problems and various maladjustments have been shown to be somewhat more pervasive among children whose parents have died compared to those who have not experienced parental loss (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982).

At best, however, the research seems to be contradictory yielding findings that are far from conclusive. Wass and Stillion (1988) enforce the notion that children are rather resilient and respond well in most cases to the death of a loved one including a parent. Stephenson (1985) concludes from his interpretation of research findings that if children are provided with a stable and nurturing environment, they will generally overcome any negative effects of emotional and physical trauma. He warns us that labeling children may damage them over a lifetime if their loss is viewed as a problem never to be overcome. While the large issue of parental deprivation (separation of parents, divorce, death) on childrens' emotional and physical health has been studied at some length, perhaps Rutter (in Stephenson, 1985) sums it up appropriately in stating that parent death alone is not a determinant of later psychological or social pathology. A more recent study by Landerman, George, and Blazer (1991) on adult vulnerability for psychiatric disorders concluded that parental death was not linked with events that might increase the possibility of psychiatric problems. And in the latest and perhaps most credible studies directed by Worden and colleagues and soon to be published in a new book When a Parent Dies: Counseling Bereaved Children (New Research, 1995), of the 125 children from 70 bereaved families only one-third showed serious levels of emotional disturbance over time. Parental loss does not significantly impact all bereaved children he concludes and therefore all bereaved children do not require therapy or intervention. Nor did the study find any significant behavioral problems at school among bereaved children.

While death is a traumatic experience and a difficult blow to a child, the nature of emotional and behavioral changes thay may occur in later life must be viewed within the context of several variables, not just the death loss itself. Worden and colleagues concluded that children who generally performed the best following a parent's death were those who had the fewest changes and disruptions in their lives.

Just as a child's concept of death as defined by the dimensions of universality, irreversibility, and nonfunctionality vary considerably through at least age 10 (Speece & Brent, 1992), so does a child's response to death. Some children, with or without strong support networks, may respond most favorably and show little if any pathology following the death of one or both parents or other close relatives. As Rodabough (1980) suggests, no two children react in the very same way to the death experience. Some have mature attitudes and understand a great deal about it, others do not. Thus bereaved children cannot be treated in the same manner.

Sometimes creative energies are unleashed and loss through death serves as a signficant stimulus for living. For example, parental death seemed to key the ambitions of such notables as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Lincoln, Lenin, Darwin, and Tolstory leading them onward to greatness (Kearl, 1989). Others who experience death early in their lives may have difficulty in coping as a young adult. As noted earlier, it may be variables other than death per se that are the determining factors. According to Kearl, death can spawn depression and social withdrawal, or it can invigorate and stimulate individuals to pursue new heights in their many performances. Not only is this a logical assumption for childrens' behavior, a similar principle should apply for older individuals who are impacted with significant loss.

Child's Coping with Parental Death

Those who harbor fears about the welfare of children left to grieve the loss of one or both parents should know that, on average, children who are surrounded by alternative sources of emotional support and understanding tend to adjust well (Aiken, 1994). There should not be a major fear of continuing pathology. There are some caveats, however, as gleaned from the research of Krupnick, (1984) that merit attention. He identified several situations, when present and when interacting with other variables, that may exacerbate the grieving process of bereaved children due to

parental loss including:

> Parental death, particularly that of the mother, during the early period of a child's life.

> Greater postbereavement risk among children with preexisting psychological difficulties.

> Possessive and extremely child-dependent parents.

> Diminished family and community support groups.

> Unstable family environment or a family in constant transition.

> Marital conflict resulting in separation, divorce, remarriage.

> Poor concept of death and little formal preparation for it.

> Conflictual relationship with the child prior to the death of a parent.

In the final analysis no one, including children, can be protected from death's inevitability. While a parent may fear her or his own demise during the early developmental years of their child or children, such a possibility should not create a pervasive atmosphere of fear and anxiety. Death touches us all; it is only a matter of time. How we handle and respond to it is the crucial concern. Children can be taught in a developmentally appropriate manner about death and its harsh realities. However, they too must experience it and come to know that dying and death are necessary experiences that occur during the living, loving, losing and letting-go cycle and that fears associated with the possibility of parental loss are normal.

References

Aiken, L. R. Dying, death, and bereavement, 3rd ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1994.

Becker, E. The denial of death. New York: The Free Press, 1973.

Berlinsky, I. and E. Biller. Parental death and psychological development. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1982.

Fulton, G. B. and E. K. Metress. Perspectives on death and dying. Boston: Jones & Bartlett, 1995.

Kalish, R. A. Death, grief, and caring relationships, 2nd ed. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1985.

Kastenbaum, R. J. Death, society, and human experience , 5th ed. New York: Macmillan, 1995.

Kearl, M.C. Endings: A sociology of death and dying. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Krupnick, J. L. Bereavement during childhood and adolescence. In M. Osterweis, F. Solomon and M. Green (Eds.). Bereavement: Reactions, consequences, and care (pp. 99-141). Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1984.

Landerman, R., George, L. and D. Blazer. Adult vulnerability for psychiatric disorders: Interactive effects of negative childhood experiences and recent stress. Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 179:656-663, 1991.

New research regarding the impact on children of the death of a parent. Grief Letter, 1(1), 1, Fall 1995.

Palombo, J. Parent loss and childhood bereavement: Some theoretical considerations. Clinical Social Work Journal, 9:3-33, 1981.

Rodabough, T. Helping students cope with death. Journal of Teacher Education, 31(6):19-23, 1980.

Speece, M. W. and S.B. Brent. The acquisition of a mature understanding of

three components of the concept of death. Death Studies, 16(3):211-229, 1992.

Stephenson, J. S. Death, grief, and mourning. New York: The Free Press, 1985.

Wass, H. and J. M. Stillion. Death in the lives of children and adolescents. In Wass, H., Berardo, F. M. and R. A. Neimeyer (Eds.), Dying: Facing the facts, 2nd ed. (pps. 201-228). New York: Hemisphere, 1988.

Yamamoto, K., Soliman, A., Parsons, J. and O. Davies, Jr. Voices in unison: Stressful events in the lives of children in six countries. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 28(6):855-864, 1987.